

SOUNDSCAPES OF THE BLACK HILLS: An Acoustemology of the American West

Abstract Few scholars seek both to document sound and to uncover the relationship between sound and knowledge. Anthropologist Steven Feld calls this relation *acoustemology*, a blend of acoustics and epistemology. Like Feld, I investigate “the primacy of sound as a modality of knowing and being in the world.”¹ Specifically, I cross this modality with another, that of heritage tourism. Heritage sites offer tourists education packaged as entertainment. Indigenous costumes, the taste of kettle corn, a funky cowboy tune – all signal a particular, albeit imagined, past. *Sound knowledge, acoustemology, is a key way heritage tourists imagine, experience, and remember history. Sound makes the past sensible and sensual in the present.* To probe this claim, I focus on a single example, the Black Hills of South Dakota, a heritage site of particular significance to American history, memory, and identity. Tourist soundscapes throughout the Black Hills actively present “Cowboys” and their “Indian” counterparts for visitor consumption. These sound performances act as forms of sensual historical pedagogy and serve to shape tourist knowledge and imagination of the region’s past and future.

Research Questions Heritage tourism is a complex nexus of culture, history, and consumption. Museums, memorials, and even entire towns present tourists glimpses of past people, places, and things. Carefully packaged to offer both entertainment and education, heritage sites must appeal to tourists’ imagination while generating semblances of historical accuracy. Colonial Williamsburg is an excellent example, combining traditional museums with a “living” city of reconstructed buildings, shops, and historical reenactments. Yet, even Colonial Williamsburg must compete for tourists’ leisure time and money. Success in such a competition depends upon the destination’s ability to evoke a past time and place while concomitantly providing tourists a diverse range of engaging activities.

Strategies for evoking the past come in many guises. Colonial costumes, the smell of gunpowder and horse manure, the taste of kettle corn, a thick Virginia accent – all signal a particular, albeit imagined, past. While the presumed authenticity of a heritage destination certainly depends upon the combination of these factors, I focus on just one, often neglected, strategy, that of sound. Even in our daily lives we forget the texture and dimension brought to our world through sound.

¹ Steven Feld, “A Rainforest Acoustemology,” in *The Auditory Culture Reader*, eds. Michael Bull and Les Back (New York: Berg, 2003), 223 – 240.

This is no less true of tourists. Yet, sound environments play an important part in the believability of heritage sites and, more importantly, in the believability of the historical narratives they present. A visit to Colonial Williamsburg would lose something if rock music, ambulance sirens, or car engines filled its streets. Nonetheless, sound remains an unexplored aspect of tourism.

Generally my work examines the production, circulation, and reception of cultural and historical knowledge through travel and tourism, exploring how we come to know both self and other through the mediated practices of traveling and touring. More specifically, I examine how travelers document, share, and experience the world. I am particularly concerned with links between traveling and national identity, cultural memory, and historical pedagogy. Heritage tourism is a crucial aspect of this concern. Heritage tourist sites, from Colonial Williamsburg to Mount Rushmore, narrate the history and culture of a nation; they recreate the past as a “living” experience for citizens and visitors, transforming particular narratives into “truths” while eliminating or hiding others. My argument is that the affective power of sensible knowledge, of sensible experience, is crucial to the project of narrating history, in turn, creating what Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities” and shaping particular forms of political action and critique. I see heritage tourism as a key site of this endeavor, as a location of historical and political pedagogy, a form of teaching citizenship through affect, sensation, and entertainment.

The objective of this study is to familiarize myself with the methods and concerns of sound and sensory ethnography while situating these within wider discussions about tourism, nation, history, and memory. Key theoretical questions include: *What role do sound environments play in heritage tourism? How are sound environments of the past constructed for and sold to tourists? What do these sound environments tell about how history is imagined, remembered, and reenacted? How can past sensations be known and recreated?* While these more general concerns about sound and its role in shaping public history ground this study, a second concern played an equally important part in my research: understanding the complicated history of the Black Hills and unpacking the significance of this history to American memory and identity.

Over two and a half million people visit the Black Hills each year.² It is home to Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Crazy Horse Memorial, Wounded Knee, and Deadwood, to name but a few sites. It is also a location of political struggle, the long-time battleground between the

² National Park Service, U.S. Department of Interior, “Park Statistics,” *Mount Rushmore National Memorial*, <http://www.nps.gov/moru/parkmgmt/statistics.htm>.

native Lakota and the United States government.³ As both a popular and a contested destination, it is a perfect case to study the production and circulation of sensual (cultural and historical) knowledge. On one hand, knowledge gathered during tourist encounters resonate with an “extraordinary” quality absent everyday life, making discussions of affect and sensory experience extremely pertinent. On the other hand, the effect of sensory immersion is to limit critical engagement with the narratives being produced and circulated. In a place such as the Black Hills, for example, indigenous genocide is re-packaged and performed as the detached, eternally past “Cowboy and Indian” myths of Hollywood films and dime novels.

Research Methods

My fieldwork took place over two weeks (see itinerary) in June 2009 and included visits to major tourist attractions of the Black Hills region of South Dakota. Some of the more significant destinations of my tour were: Mount Rushmore National Memorial, Crazy Horse Memorial, Wounded Knee, Wind Cave National Park, Deadwood, and Wall Drug. At each site, I recorded various tourist soundscapes, from gift shops to guided tours, and collected images of each location recorded. I also sketched maps of each soundscape and noted any sound-related artifacts or signage, e.g. an audio tour of Mount Rushmore (CD) or a book about native music. My fieldwork yielded: 105 audio recordings; 836 photographs; and 20 sound sketches. I also collected 6 books, 9 audio CD’s, and a box of maps and brochures.

After returning from the field, I attempted to categorize my field recordings and artifacts, looking for recurrent themes relevant to both the region’s history and to its significance as a tourist destination. I also tried to assess the variable ways sound was used to evoke emotion, to narrate the past, or to reference popular culture. Finally, I sought to isolate specific references to sound, such as a gift shop sign that reads: “Do not blow the whistles.” In these cases, I aimed to examine the context and purpose of such references and their role in the overall narrative of the site.

Research Results

My cursory findings, while grossly under-developed at the moment, indicate the validity of my original hunch: sound plays an important role in how heritage tourists experience, remember, and know the locations they tour and the past these locations signal. The “Cowboy and Indian” myth is one central element of the Black Hills tourist landscape, one that dominates tourist soundscapes of the region. Hotel lobbies, museum gift shops, restaurants, street performances, and more are all pervaded with “cowboy” tunes and their

³ For examples of this conflict: *Sacred Land Film Project* at <http://www.sacredland.org/index.php/black-hills/>; Ward Churchill’s *Struggle for the Land*; or Peter Matthiessen’s *In the Spirit of Crazy Horse*.

“native” counterparts. I keep both in quotes to call attention to the imaginary aspect of each. Stereotypical sound elements are everywhere – from the thick twang of the yodeling cowboy I met in Deadwood (*Is his accent part of his performance?*) to the flute music filling Kevin Costner’s *Tatanka* Museum (*Do all Native Americans really listen to pan flutes?*). While the “Cowboy and Indian” myth is merely one of many narratives significant to the public history and memory of the Black Hills, it is by far the most dominant. “Cowboy and Indian” tales shape how the region is performed for tourists, but they also play an important part in popular knowledge of American history and identity. These connections recur in the tourist soundscapes I documented. The following is an assessment of two tracks recorded during my trip. This analysis was presented on October 30, 2009, at the Neil Postman Graduate Conference sponsored by NYU’s Department of Media, Culture, and Communication.

[An analysis of *Tatanka* from Costner’s *Tatanka* Museum: 2min.]

HEARING INDIANS: The “savage” must be silen(ced)

Cowboys and Indians dominate how America is imagined, both at home and abroad. The narratives that frame relations between cowboys and Indians, civilization and wilderness, are practically un-ending; they include accounts of “real” cowboys, like Buffalo Bill Cody and Theodore Roosevelt, and “real” Indians, such as Black Elk and Crazy Horse. But, these “real” accounts mix with the tall tales of popular fiction: Tonto and the Lone Ranger, for example. The battle between these two characters is not personal; it is the natural outcome of civilization and progress. The Lone Ranger’s goal was, after all, “to make the West a decent place to live.”⁴ The Indian, while still imagined as the “savage” counterpart to the “civilizing” cowboy, is contained and controlled here through sound, a quiet (absent even) sound appropriate to assimilation. I hear no battle cries, no gunfire, and no human voices. The Indian is heard here as the “noble savage” – calm, quiet, and *au naturale*.

Tatanka, the title of the soundscape I’ve just introduced as well as the Lakota word for buffalo, was recorded at *Tatanka: Story of the Bison*, a museum created by actor Kevin Costner just north of Deadwood in the Black Hills. The museum includes a small building with artifacts, including memorabilia from the film, a gift shop and snack bar, and a chunk of land, rolling hills with tall prairie grasses. Tourists can take a guided or unguided tour, along a paved walkway, past a tipi

⁴ J.S. Lawrence, “The Lone Ranger: Adult Legacies of a Juvenile Western,” in *Hollywood’s West: The American Frontier in Film, Television, and History*, eds. J.E. O’Connor and P.C. Rollins (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), 81.

and some picnic tables, to the museum's main attraction: a life-size bronze sculpture of 14 bison pursued by 3 Indian hunters. The tall grasses surrounding the sculpture are home to the crickets and flies heard in the recording. Music is piped through speakers surrounding the sculpture. While the tracks change continuously, the affect they evoke does not. Sadness. Longing. Quiet acceptance. Silence. Inevitable progress. (Can you hear the highway in the background?) The Indian does not make noise. The Indian is a lullaby for children.

The natural Indian I hear is, of course, only the defeated one, the Indian of the past. Narratives of rebellion, genocide, or current reservation conditions are erased absolutely, replaced by the beauty of an ideal type with ample sadness and nostalgia. (This is an ethnographic present – an eternally present past – constructed for the detached gaze of the future.) Costner had this to say at the museum's grand opening in 2003:

Tatanka was not designed as the white man's version of the Native American. Rather it stands as a centerpiece for two cultures, one whose very lives depended on the buffalo and one who saw it as a means to an end. It recognizes and accepts that this is our mutual history.⁵

Acceptance of history is a powerful claim for any museum to make, especially one that, similar to its cinematic soundscapes, so completely erases living indigenous voices, teaching instead a history of cowboys and Indians that is iconic and imagined.

[An analysis of *Wild Bill Shootout from Deadwood's No. 10 Saloon: 2min50sec.*]

LISTENING TO COWBOYS: The "civilizing" noise of progress

The "wild" town of Deadwood, while a popular tourist destination throughout the twentieth century, experienced a recent boom in tourism, a boom generated by the legalization of gambling⁶ and by the popularity of the HBO television series *Deadwood*⁷. Deadwood, in fact and fiction, has a central place in tourist imagination of the Black Hills as a "wild" frontier of gold diggers, outlaws, cowboys, and prostitutes. Deadwood appeared often and prominently in dime novels of the nineteenth century and in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. It is imagined as a lawless space where man battles man, savage, and nature all for the elusive gold nugget; in short, it is a microcosm of the American West. A key myth to mark Deadwood as a heritage destination is the shooting of gunslinger Wild Bill Hickok.

⁵ For more information about the museum, visit its website at <http://www.storyofthebison.com/>.

⁶ G. Perret, "The Town That Took a Chance," in *American Heritage*, 52(2), 54.

⁷ M. Mitchell, "Deadwood, South Dakota: Place and Setting Combine with Gambling and Historic Preservation," in *Focus on Geography*, 51(2), 28.

Actors and tourists reenact Hickok's murder four times each summer day in Deadwood's No. 10 Saloon. The No. 10 is located on Deadwood's busy Main Street and is surrounded by casinos claiming historical importance. (In fact, the entire town became a National Historic Landmark in 1961.) The reenactment takes place in the back of No. 10 and uses actors for key parts (Hickok, McCall, Sheriff Bullock) with tourists playing the roles of saloon girls, poker players, and audience. Each show ends with a shootout in the street between Bullock and McCall. A public trial of McCall takes place once nightly and involves a tourist jury. The track I've just played, *Wild Bill Shootout*, is the last 3 minutes of a 30-minute show. The track starts with an upbeat banjo (to set the mood... after all, even murder is humorous in the Wild West) and is then split between a "voice-of-god" narration (pre-recorded), Hickok and McCall (the actors), saloon girls and poker players (tourist actors), and the audience.

A number of significant differences emerge if comparing *Wild Bill Shootout* to *Tatanka*. While the cowboy clearly symbolizes civilization, he is noisy, boisterous, and playful. Hickok's murder is repeated without sadness or longing; it is happy, ironic, and matter-of-fact (even the saloon girls wailing in the background raise a smile). It is a necessary step toward lawful progress. And, of course, the tourist audience is positioned accordingly (It is a bar, after all!). Parents drink whiskey and cokes, their children scarf down cheeseburgers, and grandpa slips quarters in the slot machine – all while hearing Hickok die for the third time today. Costner's museum (even while outdoors) permits none of this. *Tatanka* requires barely a whisper, a nod of agreement, from its guests. The No. 10, conversely, demands deep chuckles, heehaws, and clanking glasses. (So, long as you return to lawful behavior after vacation, that is.) Thus, while *Tatanka* affects an erasure of history, *Wild Bill Shootout* produces its presence over and over and over again. Or, perhaps even more accurately, the pasts each track makes present work together to construct a narrative of the American West where Indians are the "once wild, now passified" counterparts to the eternally active, empowered (yet playful) cowboys.

Research Conclusions

This study serves only as a preliminary investigation into the sonic dimensions of heritage tourism. It asks how tourist soundscapes are constructed and circulated, but does not address the crucial question of interpretation. While there is little doubt that sound and sensation do play a part in how tourists experience, remember, and know the past(s) they encounter at various heritage destinations, both the specific consequences of such sonic constructions and their individual interpretations remain unexplored. *How do the sound*

environments I've documented shape tourist experience, memory, and knowledge? Do soundscapes generate imagined communities, public histories, or collective memories? And, if so, what are the consequences of such creations for modern citizenship and political action? In other words, how do sounds mold tourists' critical relation to the region's past, present, and future? What actions do these sounds prevent or encourage? What identities do they promote or suppress? Much more work is required to address these curious questions. Personal interviews with site visitors and workers, deeper engagements with the emotional and psychological effects of sound, and additional historical knowledge of the region and its role in American history and memory must accompany the site documentation, participant observation, and historical and textual analysis employed in the current study. Nonetheless, my research thus far indicates two important theses: 1) heritage tourism is a crucial pedagogical space, a space where national narratives are performed, personal experiences are engaged, and citizens are forged; and 2) the pedagogical work of heritage tourism depends upon the sensual character of tourist sites and experiences. My work engages sound as a key component of the sensual history made available to heritage tourists, engaging also the predicament of the sonic mediation of cultural memory, national identity, and history more generally.

The findings of this study have been presented thus far at the 2009 Neil Postman Graduate Conference sponsored by NYU's Department of Media, Culture, and Communication and at a scholarly roundtable titled "Presences: Representations of/by Native American & Indigenous Peoples" sponsored in 2009 by NYU's Native People's Forum, Native and Indigenous Student Club, and Center for Multicultural Education and Programs. Presentation at the 2010 American Anthropological Association annual meeting as part of a panel titled "Perception, Production and Circulation: Sensory Ethnography through Media" will take place in November 2010. A related film, *Sweet Clover, a homecoming*, was completed in May 2010 as part of NYU's Certificate in Culture and Media sponsored jointly by the Departments of Anthropology and Cinema Studies. A webpage and CD of recordings, artifacts, and photographs is in progress.

This research was generously supported by a grant from NYU's Council for Culture and Media and by a Dean's Grant for Graduate Student Research from NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Communication, and Human Development.

Thanks to Marita Sturken, Faye Ginsburg, Martin Scherzinger, and Ben Kafka for their support. Special thanks to Kevin T. Allen.

FIELDWORK ITINERARY

June 11 – June 24, 2009

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| 6/11 | Drive Grand Island, NE to Hot Springs
Wounded Knee, Pine Ridge Reservation
Historic Log Cabins, Hot Springs, SD | 6/18 | Drive to Deadwood, SD
Deadwood Visitor's Center
Check-in Burgers Cabin |
| 6/12 | Pioneer Museum, Hot Springs
Tour Wild Horse Sanctuary | 6/19 | Black Hills Mining Museum, Lead
Home Stake Mine, Lead
Tour Deadwood and Mount Moriah |
| 6/13 | Mammoth Site, Hot Springs
Hot Springs walking tour
Kidney Springs and Evans Plunge
Wild Horse Sanctuary | 6/20 | Wild Bill Days Rodeo & Fast Draw
Days of '76 Museum
Adams Museum
Wild Bill Shootout, Number 10 Saloon |
| 6/14 | Drive to Custer, SD
Tour Wind Cave National Park
Purple Pie Place, Custer
Check-in Trout Haven Resort | 6/21 | Tatanka Museum
Deadwood walking tour
Chinatown underground tour
Mustang Sally's, Deadwood |
| 6/15 | Mount Rushmore National Memorial
Keystone walking tour
Hill City walking tour | 6/22 | Drive to Wall, SD
Rapid City/I-90 Visitor's Center
Check-in Best Western, Wall
Wall Drug walking tour |
| 6/16 | Crazy Horse Memorial
Purple Pie Place, Custer
Comedy/Western Gunfight, Keystone
Campfire Cookout, Trout Haven | 6/23 | Wounded Knee Museum, Wall
Old Time Photos, Wall
Tour Badlands National Park
Drive to Murdo, SD
Check-in Country Inn, Murdo |
| 6/17 | Tour countryside, Nemo
Tour Custer State National Park
Circle B Chuckwagon Dinner Show
Crazy Horse Laser Light Show | 6/24 | 1880 Town
McNasty Brothers performance
Drive to Grand Island, NE |